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INDONESIAN UNIVERSITY GRADUATES' ENGLISH COMPETENCE FOR FACING THE ASEAN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY (AEC)

Rentauli Mariah Silalahi

Institut Teknologi Del, Indonesia
(rentaulisilalahi@gmail.com)

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ABSTRACT

The ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) has been started since 2015, yet Indonesia is not ready because many Indonesian graduates are not ready with adequate English competence. This means many students graduated from universities with poor English proficiency. To investigate this unpreparedness, this study was carried out to one of the universities in Indonesia by doing documents analysis towards the university's curriculum and the graduates' English proficiency as measured by TOEFL ITP test. After the analysis, this study found out that the university was not yet ready to produce graduates who are competent in English because the graduates' TOEFL ITP average score for all years was 457. From 944 graduates batch 2001 to 2013, there were only 2 percent who could achieve a TOEFL ITP score of 550 or more. These research findings will be very useful for stakeholder and any other universities for reflection on their preparation for producing graduates who are competent in English.

Keywords: ASEAN Economic Community (AEC); english proficiency; TOEFL ITP; curriculum

ABSTRAK

Masyarakat Ekonomi ASEAN (MEA) telah dimulai sejak 2015, namun Indonesia belum siap karena banyak lulusan Indonesia belum memiliki kompetensi bahasa Inggris yang memadai. Ini berarti banyak siswa lulus dari universitas dengan kemampuan bahasa Inggris yang buruk. Untuk mengetahui kesiapan ini, penelitian ini dilakukan pada salah satu universitas di Indonesia dengan melakukan analisis dokumen terhadap kurikulum universitas dan kemampuan bahasa Inggris lulusan yang diukur dengan tes TOEFL ITP. Penelitian ini menemukan bahwa universitas tersebut belum siap untuk menghasilkan lulusan yang kompeten dalam bahasa Inggris karena nilai rata-rata TOEFL ITP lulusan untuk semua tahun adalah 457. Dari 944 lulusan, angkatan 2001 sampai 2013, hanya ada 2 persen saja yang bisa meraih nilai TOEFL ITP 550 atau lebih. Temuan penelitian ini akan sangat bermanfaat bagi pemangku kepentingan dan universitas lain untuk merenungkan persiapan mereka untuk menghasilkan lulusan yang kompeten dalam bahasa Inggris.

Kata kunci: masyarakat ekonomi ASEAN (MEA); kemampuan bahasa inggris; TOEFL ITP; kurikulum

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INTRODUCTION

AEC stands for ASEAN Economic Community. This is an era of free trade for the ASEAN regional economic integration. When there is an integration, there should be many parties involved and due to the involvement of humans, then the humans' perceptions and attitudes should not be ignored. The people in all ASEAN countries should be well informed of the consequences of this new era and therefore should be well prepared to welcome the era. A study conducted on finding out public opinion about the AEC confirmed that people in ASIA as represented by Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore were very enthusiastic and positive about the implementation of AEC that might bring fortune to the society for the global exchange of many goods, services, and employees (Benny et al., 2015). Yet, many more related studies should be carried out to other ASEAN countries so that the real reasons for why the AEC has not been running well this year may be revealed.

ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) has been officially started in 2015 but until recently the program seems not to run very well because the participating countries have not been well prepared in many sectors

especially language. One of the four pillars of the AEC is 'integration into global economy.' Being global will certainly mean having English abilities (Human Development priorities for the AEC, 2015). English has been announced as the 'official working language of the ASEAN since 2008 (The ASEAN Charter: Article 34, 2008, cited in Tantiniranat, 2015 and Human Development for Priorities for the AEC, 2015). However, it was clear that many ASEAN countries have not yet been prepared due to the lack of English proficiency as stated by Ilham A Habibie who frankly said that the lack of English proficiency among Indonesians became a major challenge for the Indonesians' participation into the AEC (Asean Studies Program, 2014).

There are five key concepts for integrating a global focus into school curricula (Mansilla & Jackson, 2011): engaging students by addressing global challenges, globalizing the context for learning, connecting to universal themes, illuminating the global history of knowledge, and learning through international collaboration. In real practice, to integrate these five concepts into a school or university curriculum is not an easy task. It will require a long in-depth discussion and comprehension of a curriculum's designers. However,

above all, the main challenge as the root that may enable the curriculum designers to grab the five concepts into a curriculum is to firstly integrate English into the curriculum as a must learned language. Every curriculum designer should be aware of the fact that English is a mandatory core subject in every curriculum in the 21st century (AACTE, 2010).

If a curriculum has some flaws, there is possibility that the students may not be prepared to face the global competition. Pyakurel (2014) revealed that lack of unified standard in university education system was the key challenge faced by universities in the AEC. So, Pyakurel deemed learning English was the major vehicle to deliver every ASEAN countries to exchange, understand, and honor every value a nation had from history, cultures, identity, and language. Therefore, it is now a huge responsibility of a university to produce graduates who are equipped with not only professional skill, but also language and intercultural skills. Apart but inseparable from those demands, there is currently an emerging issue for internationalizing a curriculum among ASEAN countries.

Internationalization of university touches the fundamental component of the university which is the curriculum that must be developed and accredited

on an international standard (Moussa & Somjai, 2015), without which this will mean the integration of English into the curriculum is a must. Moussa and Somjai mentioned some alternatives for education reforms such as training courses in cross-cultural skills, and training in foreign languages and professional skills. A good example was started long time ago between Philippines and Indonesia in supervision cooperation between universities in both countries (UP Forum, 2014). That kind of cooperation had shown the work of a global competition in which both countries learned from each other to be highly competitive in the global market.

Tantiniranat (2015) claimed that in order to be well equipped to jump into the global competition in the AEC era, an employee candidate should be able to show excellent performance on at least 10 skill categories. The ten skill categories are abilities in English and ASEAN languages, ability to value multiple identities and multiculturalism, ability to work in overseas organization or abroad, ability to adapt for changes, knowledge of ASEAN arts and culture studies, the wide worldview, own culture, ASEAN citizenship, and intercultural (communicative) skill. However, Tantiniranat emphasized that the most

predominant skills of all were English abilities and intercultural (communicative) skills. Tantiranat personally gave an in depth thought that intercultural skills was urgently needed to be integrated into the English language teaching for avoiding misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and chaos among all different cultures participating in the AEC.

Actually, for facing AEC, the ASEAN countries should not only focus themselves to master English but also to learn other languages of ASEAN countries' languages (Kamolpun, 2015).. Furthermore, Mansilla and Jackson (2011) stated that the study of world languages is a core component of global competence. Therefore learning the world languages is the urgent matter to deal with if a student wants to be able to compete in the global world. It means the more languages someone knows the more knowledge and understanding she/he has for cross cultural understanding, communication, relation, and cooperation which eventually result in mutual understanding and respect.

Having a role as a Lingua Franca for ASEAN countries, English becomes a mandatory subject taught in every school in all ASEAN countries especially in Indonesia. In Indonesia, many students even go to after school

extra course to learn English for accelerating their mastery of the language. Teaching English even becomes a promising career in Indonesia due to the demand for making every student capable of English. It is obviously a promising career because more and more students are interested to continue their study to university for English major.

In contrast to the high interest of Indonesian students to learn English, it is unlikely to Thai students. Kamolpun (2015) revealed that Thailand is a country in need of English competence improvement. He initially mentioned that the Thai students could not compete globally even regionally because of some factors, especially poor English ability. He acknowledged that the country had not yet determined the standard language proficiency test that might be used for assessing the students' English competence but he personally thought that the TOEFL test was a good choice for that purpose. In Thailand, he admitted, the TOEFL iBT average score of the university students was about 76 or equals to 540-543 for TOEFL ITP which was still very low for admission to study or work overseas (ETS 2014, cited in Kamolpun, 2015). In fact, Indonesia was on the third place after Singapore and Malaysia for English competence as assessed by

TOEFL test. Although the data mentioned that Indonesia was on the third position but it might not well represent the whole college community of Indonesia. Therefore, this study will focus on investigating the preparation of one of the universities in Indonesia in producing globally competent graduates to compete in the global competition especially in the AEC era. To do the investigation, this study formulates the research question as follows:

“How prepared is Wise University (pseudonym) to produce graduates of international quality in English competence?”

METHOD

The research was conducted by doing documents analysis and interview. The documents collected to be analyzed were the university's curriculum and the graduates' TOEFL ITP scores. Since the university still graduated students of Diploma programs since 2004 until this recent year, 2016, then the curriculum collected to be analyzed was the curriculum of the Diploma programs and so were the graduates' TOEFL ITP scores. The interview was done in order to get clarity about the data collected. The persons interviewed were the people involved in the making of the

curriculum and the English teaching. They are the vice rector for academic affairs and the English lecturer. The interview was conducted using semi structure interviews as to make the interview runs smoothly following the flow of the talk. Furthermore, for mapping the graduates' English competence into the current Common European Framework Reference for Languages or CEFR, the researcher did some mapping work in order to find out the level of the graduates' English competence either they have the level of A2, B2, B1, or C1.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Curriculum

The curriculum of all study programs at Wise University was designed with a thorough and critical thinking so that the curriculum matched the students' needs and the markets. The design work itself was monitored and reviewed by senior lecturers as academic supervisors of Wise University from the Bandung Institute of Technology; a very well-known university in Indonesia for its highly prestigious achievements.

The vice rector of academic affairs of the university granted that the university really cared for the students' English competence because the

university was trying to produce qualified students who would be able to compete in the global market. That was the reason why the university made English courses as mandatory courses for six semesters in Diploma program and three semesters in undergraduate program. The undergraduate program was intentionally designed to learn English less than the Diploma programs; for three semesters only, because this program's main concern was to enable the students to be professional at their own field while for English competence they were expected to learn more at their own time during their study (A. S., personal communication, May13, 2016).

The vice rector convincingly said: "The students of undergraduate program are more independent from those Diploma programs because initially the curriculum between the two is different, and that is one of those differences. However, our university provides many English programs apart from the regular classes in order to help them get the feeling of the importance

of English for their future. So far, we've made some efforts such as English day where everyone should speak English, General lectures from invited professors from English speaking countries, English clubs, English Competitions, and many more."

Table 1 shows the number of semester the students at Wise University study English during the period of their study.

It is obviously clear that the students enrolling in Diploma 3 get more advantages compared to the rest of the students because they are given an English course in every semester of their study at the university. Meanwhile, the students who enroll in undergraduate program are at the most disadvantage because they are given an English course for three semesters only. The reason behind this policy was that the curriculum was designed to focus on giving the students the main important courses that were closely and directly related to their own major (A. S., personal communication, May 13, 2016).

Table 1. The number of English courses at Wise University

Program	No. of semesters	No. of English courses
Diploma 3 Program	6	6
Diploma 4 Program	8	6
Undergraduate Program	8	3

Table 2. Course names

Courses	Diploma Program	Undergraduate Program
English 1	Basic English 1	Basic English 1
English 2	Basic English 2	Basic English 2
English 3	Advance English 1	ESP: TOEFL Preparation
English 4	Advance English 2	---
English 5	ESP: TOEFL Preparation 1	---
English 6	ESP: TOEFL Preparation 2	---

In addition, there is also a perception from the members of the curriculum designers stating that the students of undergraduate program should be able to manage their own time to study English and improve their competence independently without supervision because these students have more free time compared to those Diploma students (A. S., personal communication, May 13, 2016). Table 2 shows the detailed names of each course given to the students for all programs.

The English courses given in the first year were the same for all majors which were about the basic of English. Basic English means learning the essential grammar and structure of English that will help the students to use English correctly especially for productive skills; speaking and writing. Meanwhile, the Advance English means learning more varieties of English that will enable students to

read and understand different kinds of texts, to listen to various kinds of talks, to write more productively with different kinds of writing styles, and to produce spoken language using appropriate words and expressions.

Finally, the ESP or English for Specific Purpose is aimed at helping students to learn the strategies and more specific materials related to TOEFL test. This preparation is considered very useful for students because they may learn about the test and the materials, and practice doing the TOEFL exercises in enough time before finally sitting the real TOEFL ITP Test which is organized to be conducted right after the end of the TOEFL Preparation course (R.S, personal communication, May 3, 2016). The English lecturer confirmed saying "Every end of the six semesters for Diploma program, the students immediately sit the TOEFL ITP test to

know their achievement after having a TOEFL preparation course.”

Looking back at the curriculum which includes English courses to the whole semesters for Diploma students raises a curious question of why students still get low scores for TOEFL ITP while they are indeed given English courses even a special course to prepare them to sit the TOEFL ITP test. That curiosity was then answered by the English lecturer who claimed that it was not an easy job to enable the whole hundreds of students to pass the TOEFL ITP test with their very different kinds of English background and big number in a class. According to the lecturer, from around 60 students in every class, there was only about 5 percent of the students whose English capability had been way advanced over the other students while the rest were about medium to low. There was more difficulty to teach the students because the lecturer had to teach the students whose level of interest was different one to the other. There was a tendency that the weak students had no passion to learn English and seemed to be ignorance of their own weak English competence (R.S., personal communication, May 3, 2016).

The lecturer admitted saying “It is certainly not easy to teach these

students because of the students’ premier background in which from senior high school they’re already weak in English and from many informal interviews I ever conducted with my students, they admitted that they didn’t like English subject from junior and senior high schools and therefore never tried to learn the subject well.”

Given a question about the students’ overall performance in the classroom, the lecturer acknowledged that the students were able to follow the lesson, practice what was taught and almost all students were active when given some group discussions. The lecturer continued saying that the problem with their low TOEFL scores might be caused by other factors such as the pressure of the test atmosphere on the test day, the possibility of very unfamiliar test items, recordings and reading texts appeared on the test, and most probably the students unfamiliarity with the context of the test because the context was very westernized. The English lecturer claimed “Probably a class preparation is not enough to enable students pass a TOEFL test. I think it requires more than that because the most important thing is the students must firstly have a strong basic in listening skill, reading skill, and grammar. Without them, it

will be hard for the students to pass any test. These students, I must admit, they haven't given serious thought of how important English is for their future and therefore they are not serious when having English classes."

In relation to the international acknowledgement for accreditation, the vice rector admitted that the university had not yet got any international accreditation but still in progress for preparing any important data and related matters to get one of the international accreditation such as Abet. Yet, 'it may still be a long preparation', the vice rector emphasized. However, the university had already gained accreditation from the country of Indonesia for all of the study programs. Some are still C while

the others are B. Those study programs which got C were the undergraduate programs and they got a C because they were still freshly operated last year (R.S., personal communication, May 3, 2016).

Graduates' English competence

The university's graduate's English competence is measured by a TOEFL ITP test. This university has been making the policy for all students to sit a TOEFL test before graduating since 2004 or since the university graduated its first batch. However, the students were varied in scores and only few of them were able to achieve a score of 550 or above. Table 3 shows the score distribution of the students from students batch 2001 to 2013.

Table 3. TOEFL ITP scores distribution of Wise University graduates

Student Batch	Graduate Year	TOEFL ITP Score						Total Students
		>= 550	500 - 549	450 - 499	400 - 449	350 - 399	300 - 349	
2001	2004	1	7	15	19	5	1	48
2002	2005	1	6	35	39	6	2	89
2003	2006	0	3	7	23	16	9	58
2004	2007	0	0	4	13	13	1	31
2005	2008	0	0	6	26	27	6	65
2006	2009	1	24	34	3	1	0	63
2007	2010	0	23	30	3	0	0	56
2008	2011	0	14	42	7	1	0	64
2009	2012	5	37	25	2	0	0	69
2010	2013	0	11	30	23	0	0	64
2011	2014	0	22	48	16	0	0	86
2012	2015	6	25	55	25	4	0	115
2013	2016	5	16	62	42	11	0	136
		19	188	393	241	84	19	944

To be able to compete globally, the graduates must have a minimum score of 550 for TOEFL ITP. The score is equivalent to 6.5 for IELTS and 79-80 for TOEFL iBT. The TOEFL ITP score of 550 is the minimum safest score to apply for scholarship or employment overseas because there are only some universities and employers who accept applicants with a score light below it. To be highly qualified and competitive, a graduate must be able to achieve that score. The Indonesian government has actually been supporting all Indonesian graduates to improve their English competence as the government has been providing much scholarship to graduates who have intention to study overseas. However, the government requires the applicants to have a minimum score of 550 for TOEFL ITP if they are planning to study overseas.

However, reflecting to the TOEFL ITP scores Wise University graduates gained during the thirteen year period, it can be concluded that Wise University had not been successful to produce graduates with adequate English competence to compete in the global market or the AEC. Those graduates were mostly not ready to compete in the global market because there were only 19 out of 944 or only 2

percent who could get a TOEFL score of 550 and above. There is however a progress on graduates' performance because in the last two years; students batch 2012 and 2013, the graduates who gained a score of 550 and above increased, though not very significant.

The other interesting finding from the students' scores is that there is a significant threat to the students' inability to compete globally because there are around 36% of the graduates who had a very weak performance on English competence because there were 344 students who could only get a TOEFL ITP score of 450 and below. This score is very low and still below level B1 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). That means the majority graduates were at the level of basic users (Tannenbaum, 2011). Based on CEFR description, basic user indicates that the graduates: "can sometimes understand explicitly stated information in written texts and short dialogues containing simple vocabulary, can sometimes understand main ideas when they are strongly reinforced in texts and short oral exchanges, and in simple contexts, can sometimes select the appropriate verb tense and correctly choose between singular and plural nouns"

(www.ets.org). To be able to compete in the global markets, university graduates should be able to get B2 level or independent user of the CEFR, yet there were only less than 5 percent of the Wise University graduates who could achieve that level.

An important question worth to raise after analyzing this data is to find out the reasons behind the students' low performances in English. When the English lecturer was given such question, the lecturer said "Obviously, our students here are studying English as a general course, not a specialized course. Their major is also not English but Information Technology (IT). Therefore, I can see an indication that most of our students pay little concern to English courses because they still think that English is not a very important course for their career. Maybe they haven't given a serious thought for applying for a job or scholarship overseas so most of them are not really that motivated and keen to study English"

English competence based on CEFR reflected to the TOEFL ITP score

It is very important to keep an university updated with current information about the equalization of

their students English competence reflected to the international CEFR. CEFR is currently used as a standard indicator of someone's English proficiency worldwide. When reflected to the data of the Wise University TOEFL ITP scores, the students' English competences were at the range of level A2 to B2 of CEFR. Table 4 indicates those ranges of competence the Wise University graduates have.

From the data given on the table 4, it was clear that only 35 out of 944 graduates of Wise University who could achieve a B2 level of the CEFR. B2 level achievers are claimed to have abilities to: "connect information across utterances from different speakers in short dialogues and can identify main ideas and details when reinforced in lectures and longer conversations, in written text containing high-frequency academic vocabulary, can connect details and ideas to understand information that is explicitly stated or implied, and can organize appropriate ways to vary written sentences using appositives, participles, and subordinate clauses, and can demonstrate awareness of acceptable variations on basic grammatical rules".

Table 4. The Wise University graduates' English competence based on CEFR

Students Batch	CEFR levels				Total
	C1 (627-677)	B2 (543-626)	B1 (460-542)	A2 (337-459)	
2001	0	2	17	29	48
2002	0	2	30	57	89
2003	0	0	8	50	58
2004	0	0	31	0	31
2005	0	0	65	0	65
2006	0	4	51	8	63
2007	0	4	46	6	56
2008	0	1	46	17	64
2009	0	7	57	5	69
2010	0	1	33	30	64
2011	0	0	60	26	86
2012	0	6	73	36	115
2013	0	8	64	64	136
	0	35	581	328	944

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

From the literature studied and elaborated above, a conclusion may withdraw that to be prepared for facing AEC in relation to English competence, an university or a university must be able to produce graduates who are competent in English by achieving a TOEFL ITP score of 550 at minimum, makes English course as one of the must learned language and if possible learning other ASEAN languages, does some creative formulation of the materials given in the English classes so that the students will be able to have a communicative skills and cross cultural understanding, and makes some efforts to get an international

acknowledgement or accreditation for the curriculum.

The research found out that almost all of the graduates of Wise University had not been yet ready to compete in the era of ASEAN Economic Community given the data that only 2 percent of all of the graduates could achieve a TOEFL score of 550 or more. Despite the fact that those graduates had been well prepared for two semesters to study and practice TOEFL test, most of them were not able to gain the score of 550. This fact is worth given a real thought because it may raises other curiosity either there is something wrong with the students or the teachers, or is the TOEFL ITP score

really a reliable tool to determine someone's level of English proficiency.

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